

Ms. Bishop's note:

This interview took place BEFORE *The Poisonwood Bible* was published. Kingsolver was working on the novel during this time, though.

David Gergen, editor-at-large at U.S. News & World Report, talks with Barbara Kingsolver, author of High Tide in Tucson, a collection of essays exploring themes of family, community, and the natural world.



BARBARA KINGSOLVER

PBS News Hour: NOVEMBER 24, 1995

TRANSCRIPT

DAVID GERGEN: Many people say your novels have a moral vision and that's what attracts many of your readers. What I found very interesting about your new book is that in telling stories about your own life, much the same experience happened. I wanted to read just a piece back to you for our viewers that was in a chapter called "Jabberwocky" about your own life. "Once upon a time, a passing stranger sent me into exile. I was downtown in front of the Federal Building with a small crowd assembled to protest war in the Persian Gulf. He was in a black Ford pickup. As the truck roared by, he leaned most of his upper body out of the window to give me a better view of his finger. And he screamed, 'Hey, Bitch, love it or leave it,' so I left." Tell us about that.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I think it was time. I think that was probably the blue million and first time someone had told me to love it or leave it and suddenly it seemed like a very good idea. The Persian Gulf period before, during, and after was a very difficult time for me because I'm a person who uses language to try to get at truth and honesty and morality, and during that war what I found was that language, there was no possibility of using language that way. Language was perverted. We heard about a surgical war. I mean, surgery is something you get to--you know, that you use to get better, delivering the ordinance--that meant drop the bomb. If one felt that reducing a civilization to rubble through bombs was not a reasonable way to settle our differences, you weren't allowed to talk about that.



DAVID GERGEN: Your argument and your trouble you felt about our society must have preceded the war. You must have felt--

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: Of course, of course. I've always felt frustrated with the mistakes that, that we've made time and again in terms of using military might to negotiate, but this was a time when no discussion was allowed. I felt this far from a specialized kind of nervous breakdown where you stalk around a Walgreen's parking lot, ripping yellow ribbons off of car antennas, because you know, it looks very folk-loric, these pretty yellow ribbons. They're supposed to mean we support our boys, but they also mean a prayer of Godspeed to the killers. And no one was saying that, and I felt such despair that I was ready to leave. And it just seemed like a good time for our family to take a sabbatical.



DAVID GERGEN: So you took your small daughter to Spain.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: To the Canary Islands. Yeah. We lived there for a while, and--

DAVID GERGEN: What did you find? You wrote movingly about children and how children were treated in the Spanish culture.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: It was wonderful. I think one of the best things about leaving home and leaving the United States is that you can see it better; you can look back and really examine all of these things that we're taught to believe about this being the best country in every way. It's a wonderful country in many ways, and in many ways, it's a mess. And I, I loved the personal freedom of being able to walk around at night. I loved the fact that--I loved living in a place where there wasn't an immense disparity between rich and poor, where you don't have a lot of poverty, you don't have a lot of violent crime. So that was wonderful. And the thing I liked best, I think, was how people loved children. People in Spain look at children as the meringues and éclairs of their culture. And it made me realize that in many ways we look at children as toxic waste or something. I mean, that sounds over-stated, I'm sure. You love kids. I love kids. But as a society, institutionally, we don't love kids; 20 percent of our kids in this country live in poverty. That's a vile message that we're sending both to the kids who are poor and also to the ones who aren't. We're saying, communally, we don't care about you, umm--taking care of kids is one of those things like taking care of the environment that's best done by the group. You can't leave it to individuals, because not every individual parent is, is able to take care of a child perfectly well all the time, and yet, all kids are your future and my future.



DAVID GERGEN: How do you think we came to see ourselves this way? You think we've lost our sense of community, of communal feeling. That runs through a lot of your work, both your non-fiction and your fiction work.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: It's true. I think everything I write is about the idea of community and about the special challenge in the United States of balancing our idealization of the individual, our glorification of, of personal freedom and the individual with the importance of community, how to balance those two offices.

DAVID GERGEN: And you think we've lost that sense of community through the mythology that we have, the stories that we have in our heads?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I do. I think that the unifying themes of America--our myths, our religion, our sort of national religion, is about the glory and the power of the individual and our great unifying myths tell us things like anybody can make it in this country if he's smart enough and ambitious enough. Well, that's, umm, it's a very motivating myth, and it probably got people, you know, out West, and, you know, got the soil tilled and so forth. But it works only to an extent, because the other side of that story is that if you're not making it, you must be either stupid or lazy. So a lot of self-blame goes along with poverty. It's very isolating. What about bad luck, you know? I mean, what about the fact that some people who are not particularly ambitious nor particularly smart happen to be born rich? You know, what about all these exceptions?



DAVID GERGEN: So are you then trying to take your, your own--or excuse me for interrupting--

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: That's okay.

DAVID GERGEN: --but through your own novels to invent a new set of stories for us, is that what you're about?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: It is in my own little corner. That's what I'm trying to do. I love what Joseph Campbell said about mythology. He said that our stories are what holds us together as a culture, and as long as they're true for us, and as long as they work for us, they--we thrive. And when they cease to become true, we fall apart, and we have to reconstruct them or revitalize them. We have to come up with new myths. I think the stories that got us westward have ceased to become true, if they ever were entirely true. I don't know, but I know for sure now that lots of people are suffering not through their own fault. They're working very hard, and they're not surviving. We need new stories. We need stories that can help us construct, reconstruct the value of, of solidarity, of not, not the lone solo flier, but the family, the community, the value of working together.



DAVID GERGEN: Do you worry that you may debunk some of the stories about the United States, about our heritage, which, in fact, inspire people to believe in what--and that we have had a moral vision as a people, that we have had--this has been a relatively successful society, given it still has many blemishes?

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I think it's a terrific thing to value those parts of your history that--I mean, we have a terrific moral vision. Many parts of our story remain true. But until we're willing to, to look closer and find the flaws and pull them out, and sort of reconstruct the fabric, we're going to keep making the same mistakes again and again.

DAVID GERGEN: Let me ask one last question. You did decide to come home.

BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I did. It was hard to come home. It's harder to live here, you know, because of the pain of the disparity between rich and poor, because of the crime, because of the difficulties of raising children in a child-hostile culture. And yet, I could not imagine criticizing only from the distance. You know, if someone's standing across the street from you, yelling that you're doing something wrong, what do you think? You think they're a jerk. If they come across the street and help you, you think they're a worthy person. "Love it or leave it" is a coward's slogan. That's what I think. I think a more honorable slogan is "Love it and stay," "Love it and get it right," "Love it and never shut up."



DAVID GERGEN: Thank you.